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The End of the Six-Party Talks?

Strategic Insights, Volume VI, Issue 1 (January 2007)

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Strategic Insights is a bi-monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.

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Introduction

No matter how one spins it, North Korea's nuclear test of October 9, 2006 represents a major defeat for U.S. foreign policy.^[1] Pyongyang torpedoed the stalemated six-party talks on its nuclear proliferation and also called what it sees as Washington's bluff, i.e. that America can put enough pressure on North Korea—by imposing sanctions on the DPRK's foreign banking after the six parties' preliminary agreement in September, 2005 and by placing human rights on the negotiating agenda—that it will collapse, circumventing the need for detailed engagement with Pyongyang over proliferation. Indeed, if anything, the test shows Pyongyang's continuing self-confidence about the future.

A careful analysis of propaganda, policy, and planning leads to a high degree of skepticism about the possibility that North Korea is focused on mere survival: simply maintaining a self-defense capability, engineering a modest economic recovery, and coexisting peacefully with South Korea. Pyongyang appears to have far more ambitious intentions, and nothing indicates absolute desperation on the part of North Korean leaders. ...The indications are that Pyongyang envisions a bright future—it is considering significant economic changes and examining foreign systems as models.^[2]

Furthermore, this test virtually ensures that imposed regime change is now off the table as far as the other members of the six-party talks are concerned. First the DPRK's proliferation, like all other preceding ones, is a declaration of independence that it alone will control its destiny. In this case the DPRK has declared its independence not only of the United States or the Nonproliferation Treaty regime, but also of China and to a lesser degree Russia. It will now be much more difficult for any foreign states to influence its foreign and defense policies. Thus Chinese and/or Russian leverage upon it, which was never great and certainly not as great as Washington imagines, has declined still more and by an appreciable margin.

Second, by testing North Korea has evidently ensured its survival, not just against military threats, but also against internal regime failure. For it is now the case that the greatest potential threat to regional security on the Korean peninsula may not any longer be inter-Korean war, but the possibility of a failed North Korean state with inadequately controlled nuclear bombs. Every one of Pyongyang's interlocutors will now have a vested interest in preventing that state failure and in

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE JAN 2007	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2007 to 00-00-2007		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The End of the Six-Party Talks?		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School,Center for Contemporary Conflict,1 University Circle,Monterey,CA,93943		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 16
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	

helping it to survive and gain solid control of those weapons. This will be particularly true of South Korea but applies as well to the other four negotiating parties. And this interest in North Korea's survival occurs now above and beyond the fact that invasion is all but ruled out thanks to this test.

Prior to this test Washington arguably did not show the urgency it displayed towards Iraq even though the DPRK was widely believed to have actual nuclear weapons, missiles with which to weaponize them, and has sold missiles to rogue states, behavior and policy that far outstrips even the most pessimistic Iraqi scenarios in 2002-03.[\[3\]](#) Indeed Washington would not give Pyongyang any "favors" to restart the negotiations, thus condemning the talks to stalemate.[\[4\]](#) While some have argued that American policy is based on a coordinated and rigorously coordinated and implemented policy, whether Washington intended it or not, its Korean policy looked to its interlocutors except Japan like an attempt to use nonproliferation negotiations to impose externally directed regime change upon the DPRK.[\[5\]](#)

For example, in mid-2006 Washington's frustration with the ensuing stalemate at the six-party format had even led it to propose a different multilateral negotiating forum excluding but pressuring North Korea to cease its nuclear program. Not surprisingly this proposal failed as Moscow and Beijing promptly rebuffed it.[\[6\]](#) These aforementioned actions and Washington's refusal to engage North Korea within the six-party format despite Russian, Chinese, and South Korean advocacy of such engagement, probably reinforced those states' widespread and long-held suspicion as well as the DPRK's apprehensions that America really wants coerced regime change in the guise of nonproliferation talks and therefore will not negotiate seriously about ending the nuclear threat.[\[7\]](#) Thus Pyongyang struck directly at that perceived objective of coercive regime change, publicly notifying America and everyone else that efforts to use these negotiations to bring about regime change means an end to discussions over proliferation and open weaponization. And as a result Washington has achieved neither nonproliferation nor regime change.

Virtually every commentator observing this test now argues that the only way to retrieve a positive nonproliferation agreement is through a united stand by the other five members of the talks: America, Russia, China, South Korea, and Japan. But such unity seems to be more rhetorical than actual. The UN may pass some sanctions, China and Russia will be angry with Pyongyang and South Korea may change elements of its policy, but clearly the DPRK believes it can ride out whatever storm this test generates, just as it did with regard to its missile tests of July 4, 2006.[\[8\]](#) Moreover, already within the negotiations for a resolution condemning and punishing North Korea for the test the usual divisions between Washington and Tokyo on the one hand and Beijing and Moscow on the other quickly surfaced.[\[9\]](#) Indeed, Beijing and Moscow specifically objected to putting the resolution under Article VII of the UN charter which could later be used to justify force, seeing in this move a repeat of past efforts to use these talks to leverage externally coerced regime change.[\[10\]](#)

And in any case, from Pyongyang's perspective it probably saw little to be gained from going back to negotiate with Washington which it believes (along with China, Russia and South Korea), is not serious about negotiating with it as an equal. Indeed, the White House still rejects direct talks with North Korea as President Bush said at his Press Conference on October 11, 2006.[\[11\]](#) Moreover, North Korea certainly no longer expects China to be its protector, if anything it may feel betrayed by China, and will thus rely on itself.[\[12\]](#)

Consequently there are many reasons for pessimism about a serious united front against North Korea. South Korean newspapers have already charged that the U.S.-ROK relationship hangs by a thread despite official renewals of the alliance and South Korean public opinion is increasingly anti-American, as is much of elite opinion in the government.[\[13\]](#) Yet Seoul's approach, the Sunshine Policy, has obviously failed to elicit desired changes in North Korean behavior and faces strong domestic attack. Furthermore, the failure of the ROK's policies, including its parallel reliance upon China to help induce the DPRK to negotiate in good faith, has left Seoul adrift.[\[14\]](#)

It cannot support American tactics yet it distrusts Chinese policy and is unlikely simply to jettison its entire past policy especially as it regards steps that provoke North Korea as an unmitigated disaster that can bring about its worst nightmare, i.e. war.[\[15\]](#)

However Washington seems unwilling or unable to grasp that its continuing refusal to engage with Pyongyang directly only drives Seoul closer to Beijing and strengthens its search for a purely bilateral channel to Pyongyang both as a form of resistance to American policy and in a search for some kind of leverage upon the DPRK.[\[16\]](#) A U.S. policy focused exclusively on universal moralistic principles of non-proliferation and democracy that is perceived to aim at North Korean regime collapse cannot generate support in South Korea whose main concern is regional stability on the Korean peninsula.[\[17\]](#) And obviously the same is true for Russia and China.

Similarly America's position in the talks apparently demanding North Korean surrender before even considering compensations and the issues raised by its sanctions only reinforced the Russo-Chinese strategic partnership in Northeast Asia that is founded upon shared resistance to U.S. policy.[\[18\]](#) Whereas China first opposed Russia's inclusion in the six-party talks, today both states share an identical position advocating an end to sanctions, U.S. and multilateral security guarantees to North Korea, and compensation in the form of energy deliveries to it, in return for non-proliferation and a return to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its accompanying inspection regime.

Certainly their collaboration at the UN Security Council demonstrates an identity of policies and goals here.[\[19\]](#) This partnership clearly owes much to American policy, which both states regard as high-handed, overly unilateral, and belligerent, and seriously obstructs Washington's efforts to impose its preferences upon North Korea.[\[20\]](#) Yet, given the earlier divisions among Russia and China and their historic rivalry for influence in Pyongyang this partnership was hardly a foreordained outcome. Rather it is the result of American policy but it also represents what several eminent experts regard as the greatest geopolitical threat that America could face.[\[21\]](#)

The Conceptual Roots of Today's Impasse

By any account this outcome represents both a failure of policy and a mounting danger to America and South Korea if not the other negotiators. And despite the admitted possibility that no negotiation could induce or could have earlier induced the DPRK to give up its nuclear weapons program, U.S. policies have much to answer for.[\[22\]](#) The reasons for this failure on the U.S. side lie in the divisions within the Bush Administration that have precluded the development of an effective policy and in its misguided assumptions about the balance of interests involved in multilateralizing this dispute through the creation of a six-power forum. Thus the Administration has disregarded previous U.S. successes vis-a-vis North Korea and the lessons learned from them, particularly with regard to the utility of both bilateral and multilateral approaches and how to leverage China.[\[23\]](#)

Neither did it heed the lesson of past experience about the importance of drawing firm red lines as to what thresholds of behavior North Korea should know it cannot cross with impunity.[\[24\]](#) Instead the Administration had no red lines whatsoever, arguing, as did Stephen Hadley, the National Security Council Director, that "the North Korean just walk right up to them and then step over them."[\[25\]](#) That policy of having no red lines and thresholds for truly unacceptable behavior illustrates with great starkness just how much of U.S. policy was ultimately nothing more than a bluff.

At the United States' domestic policy process level a split between those who wish to crush North Korea's regime and use all means possible short of war to do so and those who seek to engage in a negotiating process that could lead to a diplomatic solution has precluded an effective negotiating stance on the part of U.S. envoys and restricted them unduly.[\[26\]](#) On at least one

occasion, if not more, intercession by Vice-President Richard Cheney, leader of the faction determined to coerce North Korea into regime change, has prevented negotiators from moving ahead on agreements.[\[27\]](#) As one analyst observes:

Bureaucratic rivalries within the first George W. Bush Administration were so deep that they seemed to paralyze the decision making process. As a result, for more than three and a half years, the national security team was unable to come up with a single, focused policy to deal with North Korea.[\[28\]](#)

Neither did matters improve during Bush's second term. After the agreement of September 19, 2005 the hard-liner faction launched a determined drive to bring into the negotiations extraneous issues like DPRK counterfeiting and drug running and its abysmal human rights record and impose sanctions upon Pyongyang for these activities in order to stall or derail negotiations. This group also reinterpreted the agreement of September 19, 2005 concerning the provision at an appropriate time of a light water reactor to North Korea as meaning that the DPRK would have to first surrender and stop its nuclear programs before Washington would even *consider* discussing provision of such a reactor.[\[29\]](#) This seemed to return to the position perceived by North Korea since the start of the negotiations in 2003.[\[30\]](#) Accordingly America's negotiating posture for the six-party non-proliferation talks now included human rights and North Korean economic crimes as well as the previous sessions' non-proliferation agenda.[\[31\]](#) This posture ensured stalemate and certainly contributed to the DPRK's nuclear test and refusal to rejoin the negotiations.

This reformulation of the U.S. negotiating posture led to Sino-Russo-ROK agreement concerning the points at issue in the nonproliferation agenda, a Sino-ROK proposal that became the basis for the 2005 agreement, and more recently a Sino-ROK proposal to restart the talks.[\[32\]](#) These actions suggest that Washington's demand of total surrender to its agenda before considering the DPRK's issues and its addition of extraneous, if not irrelevant, issues to the negotiating agenda undermined the other parties' confidence in American policy and has contributed to their irritation with the policy and their frustration and obstruction of it. Not only does this apply to Russia and China but the gaps between Washington and Seoul are also quite instructive in this regard.[\[33\]](#)

This policy, which oscillates inconclusively between coercing surrender and diplomatic engagement, evidently is based upon assumptions of American superiority that can be transformed through a series of assertive acts of will into victory and that North Korean military action was neither imminent nor likely. Therefore no urgency was felt about moving quickly to quash the North Korean program either diplomatically or otherwise. Unrelenting pressure evidently was supposed to suffice on its own even though this has never occurred before.[\[34\]](#)

Washington's unsuccessful policies also appear to be driven by a determination to do nothing that would arouse criticism from congressional and right-wing Republicans who had earlier launched strong attacks upon what they considered to be President Clinton's "appeasement" of North Korea.[\[35\]](#) Demonizing North Korea and 'standing tall' on behalf of human rights' plays well to these audiences even though it impedes genuine progress in the negotiations. Certainly the September, 2005 deal did not appeal to Republican conservatives who promptly attacked it.[\[36\]](#) By insulating itself from Congressional attacks the Administration added to its international difficulties in making progress toward an accord.

So while war on the Korean peninsula is unthinkable in Washington, America's policy amounted to a series of provocations to the DPRK that led it to fully nuclearize its arsenal and could lead it to fight to preserve its regime. Seen from Seoul and Beijing, if not Moscow, American policy, focused on terminating the DPRK's program, and too often arguing for regime change thus appears to be threatening or leading to a war not nonproliferation. Thus these governments have criticized those policies.[\[37\]](#) They see Washington as ignoring their vital regional aims and tempting fate. America's apparently self-centered pursuit of its own global interests at the expense of their vital regional interests has given rise to stalemate, if not failure because it gives

other states no incentive to build a consensus on those points of nonproliferation with which they agree with Washington. Hence this strategy disregards elementary lessons of the earlier successful negotiations a decade ago.[\[38\]](#) Consequently these governments also feel obliged to defend their interests against American pressure. And when allies, like South Korea with its growing economic and political ties to Beijing (and Moscow), have other choices that seem to provide better alternatives to resolving those allies' interests, they will then gravitate to those other alternatives. Then the U.S.-ROK alliance, notwithstanding official proclamations to the contrary, will continue to erode absent corrective action soon.

An alliance in which one partner treats his own strategic interests as the sole practical issue confers no additional security on its members. For it provides no obligation beyond what considerations of national interest would have impelled in any event.[\[39\]](#)

U.S. foreign policy makers have also postulated unfounded and ultimately counter-productive foreign policy rationales for multilateralizing the format of these talks. To be sure, there are those who argue that this is the right track for American diplomacy and represents a success for it. Administration spokesmen, starting with President Bush raise the genuine threat posed by the DPRK's nuclearization to the entire region and also argue that since Pyongyang cannot be relied upon to uphold any treaty with Washington alone, bilateralism is ruled out. All the neighbors must participate in the process.[\[40\]](#) Paul Bracken contends that the arrangement of this format represents a triumph of U.S. diplomacy.[\[41\]](#) Henry Kissinger has likewise argued that multilateral discussions are essential because otherwise North Korea can make side deals with each individual player, play them off against each other and escape the responsibility of having to fully live up to its side of these bargains. Therefore it must be compelled to negotiate with everyone who has vital interests in this matter simultaneously.[\[42\]](#)

Even though this argument overlooks the actual negotiating record where both China and America were content to see Russia not participate and only Pyongyang's insistence upon it led to a six-party format, and where Seoul, Moscow, and Beijing have all urged bilateral engagement with Pyongyang within the multilateral context there are also other reasons for suggesting that a multilateral framework or at least this particular one does not represent a triumph of diplomacy but rather an abdication of it. There are good reasons to believe that the Administration's internal divisions precluded any other solution since direct bilateral talks with the DPRK were ruled out. Thus Washington has actually outsourced the problem to China believing that it had the leverage and interest to compel North Korea to surrender to American wishes.[\[43\]](#)

Misreading Chinese Policy

The belief that China will rescue an incoherent American policy and pressure North Korea on Washington's behalf has proven to be utterly misguided and unfounded in spite of China's mounting exasperation with North Korea.[\[44\]](#) Worse yet, the logic of the argument that Washington cannot produce sufficient pressure on Pyongyang to do supposedly what is in its best interest only drives South Korea closer to Beijing since the political dividends it would like to receive from the alliance with America are greatly diminished by this refusal to engage the DPRK. Second, this argument, which has consistently failed to be validated in reality, leads to greatly enhanced Chinese leverage upon American policy and not just in regard to Korea.[\[45\]](#) Yet the Administration and its supporters still invoke it in the wake of the North Korean test even though China may be angling to exploit it for its benefit even as it registers its own exasperation with North Korea. Worse, the increasingly visible danger in doing so is that any American position surrendered to China cannot be retrieved.[\[46\]](#) As Graham Allison has observed, America's failure or defeat is China's opportunity.[\[47\]](#)

China has never been willing to go as far as Washington wants nor able to move North Korea as far as Washington wants.[\[48\]](#) It prizes North Korea's stability over Washington's demands and

while it opposes North Korean nuclearization it cannot and will not support policies that represent an attempt to impose regime change on North Korea.^[49] Indeed, it values North Korea as a reason for tying down thousands of U.S. military forces who might otherwise be assigned to Taiwan.^[50] A crisis over North Korea might possibly also upset the leadership balance within Beijing. It was, is, or should have been clear that China will neither sacrifice North Korea to America nor insist on its total denuclearization despite Pyongyang's exasperation of China. China also stands aside from anti-proliferation initiatives like the Proliferation Security Initiative, advocates security guarantees for North Korea, and has been consistently skeptical of U.S. initiatives and claims, often blaming Washington if not it and Pyongyang for failures to make progress.^[51] Therefore the ROK's and Russia's rapprochements with China represent a significant loss of political support for Washington to China and should raise serious concern in America.

Thus this approach greatly misreads China's objectives in regard to North Korea. More recently, Xiaoxiong Yi wrote even before the September 19-20, 2005 agreement that:

China has no intention to "help" the United States. What Beijing wants is to draw a comprehensive "Korean peninsula road map" and to play a prominent role in Northeast Asia. For Beijing, the building blocks with which it can assemble a road map are the following. the first is to press Washington and Pyongyang to agree on "face saving" language that would provide a framework for future negotiations. Then what China wants is a U.S. nonaggression assurance provided for North Korea, co-sponsored by China. The third is a Chinese and Russian informal or formal security guarantee for North Korea, and fourth, new South Korean and Japanese economic aid for North Korea. The goals of a Beijing "road map" would be, in effect, twofold: first, to facilitate the transformation of North Korea into a large economic development zone for China's economic development and a stable buffer state for China's national security, rather than an assembly line for weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missiles, and second, to reduce the American influence in South Korea and to create a strategically neutralized Korean peninsula. From China's point of view, whether or not the six nations can agree on how to stop Pyongyang's nuclear program, the talks have produced at least one breakthrough: the emergence of China as a more confident power broker in the region.^[52]

Similarly Bon-Hak Koo writes that:

China seems to prefer to maximize its strategic interests in the process of nuclear negotiations rather than pursuing a complete resolution of the North's nuclear issue. China intends to use the North Korean card against a strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese security cooperation in the Northeast Asian region. China's major concern is not to change the North Korean regime, but to manage North Korea and maintain stability on the Korean peninsula.^[53]

No less frustrating to Washington, if not Seoul, is the fact that China evidently has less leverage on North Korea or willingness to deploy whatever leverage it does possess than Washington continues to insist that it does.^[54] While the U.S. government continues to press China to exercise this leverage against Pyongyang and even occasionally threatens a reversal in relations with Washington if Beijing does not do so; evidently China regards these calls from senior U.S. policymakers as an attempt to pressure it to abandon a buffer state and ally to Washington's unipolar demands or as a pretext for starting a crisis that could lead to war.^[55] Naturally neither outcome is acceptable to China. Thus the fear that U.S. policy might lead to either war or a collapse of the DPRK has galvanized China to seize the diplomatic initiative in unprecedented ways that have clearly strengthened its overall position in Asia and improved its relations with South Korea.

Yet, unexpectedly from Washington's standpoint, as in July, 2006 when it spurned Beijing's advice not to test its missiles, North Korea has shown growing resistance to China and a process of mutual estrangement and a Chinese reevaluation of policy clearly appears to be taking place.^[56] And the fact of the test plus the fact that China was evidently given 20 minutes notice of it, suggests Pyongyang's distrust of Beijing's motives.^[57] Indeed, Pyongyang's anger with Beijing and sense of its betrayal may have contributed to the decision to launch the test.^[58] And China may be pondering revising its non-aggression treaty with the DPRK as it has dropped several hints over the past decade that the treaty no longer means to it what its original intent and language clearly state, i.e. a close alliance with North Korea.^[59] Indeed, Jasper Becker claims that China made contingency plans for a possible invasion of North Korea in 2003 when it worried about an American strike against the DPRK's nuclear facilities. The aim would have been to instill a pro-Chinese regime that would forsake nuclearization. But he reported that China's military chiefs said this could not be done.^[60]

This growing estrangement actually makes it harder to influence Pyongyang to shun nuclear weapons but is unlikely to produce a total rupture between it and Beijing. Still, this disregard for China's advice publicly exposes the limits of China's supposed leverage upon North Korea, surely not Beijing's objective. So it is unlikely to make too many further demands upon Pyongyang lest it be rebuffed again and its weakness exposed. Despite North Korea's obduracy, this U.S. pressure upon Beijing incurs Chinese resistance and skepticism and also fortifies North Korea's refusal to listen to Beijing. Among other reasons North Korea resists China is because doing so then obliges Beijing to pay it more blackmail in the form of economic and food aid just to have it come to the talks and/or to survive.^[61]

Accordingly China cannot be happy with Washington for putting it in what could be a no-win and even major crisis situation. Neither is it pleased with North Korea for constantly blackmailing it and spurning its advice as noted above. Indeed, in response to the North Korean missile tests China undertook a series of initiatives to show Pyongyang its displeasure.^[62] These episodes support the argument that there are visible signs of a mutual estrangement between the two governments but they do not mean that China will soon adopt the U.S. position or tactics. Although North Korea's non-nuclearization is a vital priority for China, preserving peace and stability on the peninsula outranks it. Indeed, China probably has a greater stake in preserving North Korea's stability than does any of the other players in the talks. China's stake in North Korean survival is demographic (refugees being a major fear), economic, and strategic. China will surely make maximum efforts to prevent a war or pressure aiming towards a collapse of North Korea over preventing its nuclearization.^[63]

China can afford to resist U.S. pressures because they ultimately conflict with its most vital interests of preserving peace around its frontiers and retaining influence over North Korean developments. For should Beijing pressure Pyongyang to surrender to American demands when the thrust of the DPRK's foreign policy is to compel Washington to engage it seriously and bilaterally, China will paradoxically have then reduced whatever leverage it might have over Pyongyang. It might seem bizarre but Chinese elites view this leverage as something that must generally be used sparingly lest it diminish. Certainly it should not be used primarily to advance American interests.^[64] This will remain a determining factor in Chinese policy even though Chinese analysts and officials know all too well that the DPRK's nuclear gambit aims to free itself from Chinese pressure on its security affairs while maximizing its ability to extort aid from China, Russia, Japan, the ROK, and America.

Yet even so, there is no rational basis for thinking that China will undermine its own security interests to please Washington's hawks who demand what Chinese officials have perceived as a unilateral North Korean surrender.^[65] Thus we can see how misplaced are Washington's assumptions that China will promote U.S. interests while Washington need not engage the DPRK in a serious dialogue or offer it some tangible surrogate for the benefits that nuclear weapons confer upon it. Beijing's grasp of the American position also explains why it (with Moscow and

Seoul) argues that North Korea's denuclearization must be coupled with security guarantees, economic assistance, and the right to a peaceful nuclear program under the NPT.

Meanwhile in Beijing and elsewhere U.S. recalcitrance about direct talks with Pyongyang also looked like an effort to shift the burden and cost of U.S. policy failures onto China and the other negotiators and make them bear those costs. Several analysts have charged that American policy in revealing North Korean proliferation in 2002 aimed at frustrating Japanese and ROK initiatives to improve ties with the DPRK.[\[66\]](#) And while that remains unproven, all the other parties have sought to enhance ties with North Korea in the belief that doing so improves their overall position in Northeast Asia. Therefore China, Russia, and South Korea are naturally unwilling either to bear these costs of American failure or unwillingness to engage with the DPRK, or submit to American demands that they desist from doing so. And as the 2005 agreement indicates, they were able to resist this U.S. effort. The September, 2005 agreement was the result of a joint ROK-Chinese initiative based on their shared frustration with both Washington and Pyongyang where Washington essentially had to take the text of the agreement or be branded as the main obstacle to agreement.[\[67\]](#) Consequently those demands upon China to pressure North Korea and the belief that China has this leverage and will use it to accommodate Washington's interests were and are seriously flawed and costly assumptions going into the talks.

Those assumptions underlie America's efforts to "outsource" the resolution of this problem to a multilateral forum increasingly dominated by China, but they represent a flawed estimate of the situation and of other parties' willingness to rescue America from its mistakes. However:

Rather than adapt to the circumstances, the Bush Administration stuck to its position and thus let the situation drift. In other words, compellence failed quite spectacularly simply because the United states lacked effective means to implement it. The result was the worst of all possible worlds because North Korea acquired a more convincing nuclear capability, while at the same time continuing to receive economic support from China and south Korea and the prospects of exerting any real pressure on the DPRK continued to diminish. Moreover, the United States became dependent upon China for the success of its policy, to such an extent that spillover into other areas became noticeable.[\[68\]](#)

Thus the U.S. view that China has this leverage and will use it to serve American purposes appears to be singularly misplaced, even counterproductive.[\[69\]](#) And the falseness of basic assumptions underlying the outsourcing of the problem to China and other powers can only ensure the multiplication of impediments and losses to American policy in these negotiations. Indeed that American view concerning China's leverage upon the DPRK actually underestimates the increasingly discernible mutual dislike that underlies the allegedly fraternal relationship.

Sino-DPRK Tensions

China's entry into the WTO, Japan's slump in the 1990s, and North Korea's problems create the possibility for a potential economic colony for China in North Korea. Beijing's clear hostility to the DPRK's free economic zone in Sinuiju launched in 2002 and anger about not being consulted suggest a lurking interest in converting North Korea into an economic satellite of China, hardly Seoul's or Pyongyang's objective.[\[70\]](#) Since then Chinese economic penetration of North Korea has greatly expanded.[\[71\]](#) Meanwhile defectors from the North testify to its elite's antipathy to rising Chinese power even as the DPRK depends ever more upon Chinese aid.[\[72\]](#) Given the not so hidden tension and mutual dislike that dominates Sino-DPRK relations, North Korea will not easily increase its dependence upon Chinese aid which clearly grates upon it. But the problem of DPRK-China relations is greater than that. Despite talk of the two states' closeness like lips and teeth, there is no fraternal sentimentality between them.[\[73\]](#) As Patrick Morgan wrote in 2000:

We must also recall China's impressive cooperation on North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its contribution to containing that obstreperous government. Once Russian support for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) disappeared, China moved to distance itself from the North.

Even though it remains North Korea's only ally, by cutting that country off from most trade and aid (until providing emergency assistance in response to the famine) and by deliberately designating the ROK as its preferred partner on the peninsula, China has done more than any other state in the past few years to cripple North Korea, cast doubt upon its legitimacy, and bring it to the brink of collapse. As noted, it also contributed greatly to the direct pressure on Pyongyang to give up its nuclear program.[\[74\]](#)

Subsequent analyses suggest the validity of this approach. Liu Ming of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences writes that:

However, the scale of Chinese assistance and China's perceived big-brother position vis-a-vis North Korea do not match its practical role and influence in shaping North Korea's policy and behavior. One reason is that Pyongyang is wary of Beijing's international influence, its ability to collaborate with the United States and South Korea, its willingness to foster traditional friendship, and its credibility in fulfilling its commitments to the DPRK in case of crisis. Therefore, both openly and privately, the DPRK will try to limit or downplay China's role and influence during the resolution of the current crisis and as it affects North Korea's future, even though a certain level of involvement for the PRC in tandem with multilateral efforts is reluctantly acknowledged by the DPRK. Pyongyang generally seeks to avoid any linkage between its requests to China for economic aid and China's views on Korean peninsula issues, and to diversify its other potential sources of aid, such as Russia and international organizations. It would also attempt to raise the stakes by balancing its two neighboring giants—China and Russia—against each other. Because China is aware of North Korean suspicions and perceives the difficulty of influencing the DPRK, China has seldom used its leverage for a political purpose; this in turn restrains China's influence.[\[75\]](#)

Thus it bears reiterating that one of many clear motives for North Korea's nuclear quest is to emancipate itself from China's ability or desire to restrain the pursuit of what the DPRK deems to be its full and legitimate national interests. The attainment of a nuclear capability always involves and entails the freedom of the new nuclear power to conduct its defense policy more or less as it sees fit. North Korea's desire to free itself from both U.S. and Chinese constraints is no exception to this rule.

Misreading South Korea

Neither does South Korea support the U.S. position in these talks. As one recent assessment suggests:

For South Korea and China, and to a lesser extent Russia, the way Pyongyang is separated from its nuclear weapons matters much more. South Korea would be devastatingly affected by war on the Korean peninsula. Moreover, neither South Korea nor China want to see an early collapse of the Pyongyang regime, fearing the instability and massive disruption that would ensue. They do not want to isolate North Korea or to take major punitive steps against it if negotiations fail. Not surprisingly, there have been times during the Six-Party talks when skepticism that Washington is prepared to accept a negotiated solution has caused almost as much angst in South Korea as has North Korean intransigence. Above all, South Korea is not prepared under any circumstance to risk war in order to pressure North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. For South

Koreans, the North's nuclear weapons, however dangerous, are not an immediate threat. The consequences of an effort to eliminate the North's nuclear programs by force are, on the other hand, very real indeed.[\[76\]](#)

Indeed, Seoul's continuing but unproductive support of the DPRK to divert it from confrontation by economic and political means (and less publicly to encourage positive socio-economic, and political changes there) may well look to Pyongyang like the wedge it hopes to drive among its interlocutors. Certainly it has dismayed many in the United States and Japan.[\[77\]](#) Indeed, North Korean spokesmen abroad argue that the erosion of the ROK-U.S. alliance, the failure to stop North Korea's nuclear drive and the visible divisions among the other parties all attest to the wisdom of its policies.[\[78\]](#) Similarly one reason for Seoul's demand for operational control over the U.S. and ROK force in South Korea evidently is to prevent any possibility of the United States launching a unilateral action in the event of an emergency on the peninsula.[\[79\]](#) This is telling evidence of the erosion of the alliance. But as the ROK drifts away from Washington and towards Beijing it increasingly has nothing to show for its policies and this has led to mounting domestic opposition at home and could bring about a change of government and of policy.

Conclusion

As Christoph Bluth observes:

The political philosophy on which the foreign policy of the Bush Administration was based was incompatible with the realities on the ground in Northeast Asia. None of the key players in the region behaved in a manner compatible with U.S. policy.[\[80\]](#)

Neither has the Bush Administration taken to heart earlier U.S. negotiating lessons regarding the need for coherent, firm, united policies that also take account of China, South Korea, and the possible but limited benefits of multilateralism and bilateralism simultaneously exploited.[\[81\]](#) And given the reciprocal intransigence of both Washington and Pyongyang it is difficult to see any chance for a negotiated settlement, nor the integration of North Korea into Asia, nor the removal of the threat it poses to its neighbors. Yet it is a clear lesson to all the other participants in the talks that the only way to maximize a government's standing and influence in Northeast Asia and to obtain the DPRK's nonproliferation is by engaging North Korea. Indeed, it is precisely because Russia took this step in 2000 that it is even can participate in the talks because only North Korea insisted on its presence there.[\[82\]](#)

But the converse is equally true. To the extent that a government shuns engagement with the DPRK its position in Northeast Asia suffers. The frustration of U.S. nonproliferation objectives, the suspension of the negotiations, and the erosion of the alliance with the ROK all confirm this point. So while the ensuing political impasse may play well at home in America and North Korea, unless it is reversed soon it also generates a spiral with a great potential for a violent explosion in Northeast Asia from which nobody benefits. Certainly these tests represent a defeat for American, Japanese, South Korean, and Chinese policies. While crisis denotes both risk and opportunity for all the parties, tensions in Northeast Asia have now been dramatically heightened. U.S. officials have stated that if North Korea tests a nuclear weapon it will be a new world. Undoubtedly they are correct, but it certainly will not be a brave new world that we then enter.

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